



Play the Piano Drunk  
Like a Percussion  
Instrument Until the  
Fingers Begin to  
Bleed a Bit

**Charles Bukowski**



**CHARLES BUKOWSKI**

**PLAY THE PIANO DRUNK  
LIKE A PERCUSSION  
INSTRUMENT  
UNTIL THE FINGERS  
BEGIN TO BLEED  
A BIT**

 HarperCollins e-books



for Linda Lee Beighle,  
the best



*waiting  
in a life full of little stories  
for a death to come*





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## *tough company*

poems like gunslingers  
sit around and  
shoot holes in my windows  
chew on my toilet paper  
read the race results  
take the phone off the  
hook.

poems like gunslingers  
ask me  
what the hell my game is,  
and  
would I like to  
shoot it out?

take it easy, I say,  
the race is not to  
the swift.

the poem sitting at the  
south end of the couch  
draws  
says  
balls off for that  
one!

take it easy, pardner, I  
have plans for  
you.

plans, huh? what  
plans?

*The New Yorker*,  
pard.

he puts his iron  
away.

the poem sitting in the  
chair near the door  
stretches  
looks at me:  
you know, fat boy, you  
been pretty lazy  
lately.

fuck off  
I say  
who's running this  
game?

we're running this  
game  
say all the  
gunslingers  
drawing iron:  
get  
with it!

so  
here you  
are:

this poem  
was the one  
who was sitting  
on top of the  
refrigerator  
flipping  
beercaps.

and now  
I've got him  
out of the way

and all the others  
are sitting around pointing  
their weapons at me and  
saying:

I'm next, I'm next, I'm  
next!

I suppose that when  
I die  
the leftovers  
will jump some other  
poor  
son of a bitch.

12-24-78

I suck on this beer  
in my kitchen  
and think about  
cleaning my fingernails  
and shaving  
as I listen to the  
classical radio  
station.  
they play holiday  
music.  
I prefer to hear Christmas  
music in July  
while I am being threatened  
with death by  
a woman.  
that's  
when I need it—  
that's  
when I need  
Bing Crosby and the  
elves and  
some fast  
reindeer.

now I sit here  
listening to this  
slop in  
season—it's such  
a sugar tit—  
I'd rather play a game of  
ping-pong with  
the risen ghost  
of Hitler.

amateur drunks run their cheerful  
cars into each other  
the ambulances sing to each  
other outside.



## *an ideal*

the Waxmans, she said,  
he starved,  
all these builders wanted to  
buy him;  
he worked in Paris in London and  
even in Africa,  
he had his own  
concept of  
design...

what the fuck? I said,  
a starving architect,  
eh?

yes, yes, he starved *and* his  
wife *and* his children  
but he was true to  
his ideals.

a starving architect,  
eh?

yes, he finally came through,  
I saw him and his wife last  
Wednesday night, the Waxmans...  
would you care to meet  
them?

tell him, I said, to stick 3 fingers up  
his ass  
and flick-off.

you're always so fucking nasty, she said,  
knocking over her tall-stemmed  
glass of scotch and  
water.

uh huh, I said, in honor of  
the dead.

## *leaning on wood*

there are 4 or 5 guys at the  
racetrack bar.

there is a mirror behind the  
bar.

the reflections are not  
kind

of the 4 or 5 guys at the  
racetrack bar.

there are many bottles at the  
racetrack bar.

we order different drinks.

there is a mirror behind the  
bar.

the reflections are not  
kind.

“it don’t take brains to beat  
the horses, it just takes money  
and guts.”

our reflections are not  
kind.

the clouds are outside.  
the sun is outside.  
the horses are warming up outside.

we stand at the racetrack  
bar.

"I've been playing the races for  
40 years and I still can't beat  
them."

"you can play the races for another  
40 years and you still won't beat  
them."

the bartender doesn't like  
us.  
the 5 minute warning buzzer  
sounds.

we finish our drinks and  
turn away to make our  
bets.

our reflections look better  
as we walk away:  
you can't see our  
faces.

4 or 5 guys from the racetrack  
bar.

what shit. nobody  
wins. ask  
Caesar.

## *the souls of dead animals*

after the slaughterhouse  
there was a bar around the corner  
and I sat in there  
and watched the sun go down  
through the window,  
a window that overlooked a lot  
full of tall dry weeds.

I never showered with the boys at the  
plant  
after work  
so I smelled of sweat and  
blood.  
the smell of sweat lessens after a  
while  
but the blood-smell begins to fulminate  
and gain power.

I smoked cigarettes and drank beer  
until I felt good enough to  
board the bus  
with the souls of all those dead  
animals riding with  
me;  
heads would turn slightly  
women would rise and move away from  
me.

when I got off the bus  
I only had a block to walk  
and one stairway up to my  
room  
where I'd turn on my radio and  
light a cigarette  
and nobody minded me  
at all.

## *another argument*

she had an uncle who sniffed her  
panties by  
firelight while eating  
crackerjack and  
muffins with honey,  
she sat across from me  
in that Chinese place  
the drinks kept coming and she  
talked about Matisse, Iranian  
coins, fingerbowls at Cambridge, Pound  
at Salerno, Plato at  
Madagascar, the death of  
Schopenhauer, and the times she and  
I had been together and  
ebullient.

drunk in the afternoon  
I knew she had kept me too long  
and when I got back to the *other*  
she was  
raving  
underprivileged  
pissed and  
bloody unorthodox burning  
mad.

then she said it didn't matter anymore  
and I felt like saying  
what do you mean it doesn't matter anymore?  
how can you say it about anything, least of  
all us? where are your eyes and your feet and  
your head? if the thin blue marching of troops is  
correct, we are all about to be  
murdered.

## *the red porsche*

it feels good  
to be driven about in a red  
porsche  
by a woman better-  
read than I  
am.

it feels good  
to be driven about in a red  
porsche  
by a woman who can explain  
things about  
classical  
music to  
me.

it feels good  
to be driven about in a red  
porsche  
by a woman who buys  
things for my refrigerator  
and my  
kitchen:  
cherries, plums, lettuce, celery,  
green onions, brown onions,  
eggs, muffins, long  
chilis, brown sugar,  
Italian seasoning, oregano, white  
wine vinegar, pompeian olive oil  
and red  
radishes.

I like being driven about  
in a red porsche  
while I smoke cigarettes in  
gentle languor.

I'm lucky. I've always been  
lucky:  
even when I was starving to death  
the bands were playing for  
me.  
but the red porsche is very nice  
and she is  
too, and  
I've learned to feel good when  
I feel good.

it's better to be driven around in a  
red porsche  
than to own  
one. the luck of the fool is  
inviolable.

## *some picnic*

which reminds me  
I shacked with Jane for 7 years  
she was a drunk  
I loved her

my parents hated her  
I hated my parents  
it made a nice  
foursome

one day we went on a picnic  
together  
up in the hills  
and we played cards and drank beer and  
ate potato salad and weenies

they talked to her as if she were a living person  
at last

everybody laughed  
I didn't laugh.

later at my place  
over the whiskey  
I said to her,  
I don't like them  
but it's good they treated you  
nice.

you damn fool, she said,  
don't you see?

see what?

they keep looking at my beer-belly,  
they think I'm  
pregnant.



oh, I said, well here's to our beautiful  
child.

here's to our beautiful child,  
she said.

we drank them down.

## *the drill*

our marriage book, it  
says.  
I look through it.  
they lasted ten years.  
they were young once.  
now I sleep in her bed.  
he phones her:  
"I want my drill back.  
have it ready.  
I'll pick the children up at  
ten."  
when he arrives he waits outside  
the door.  
his children leave with  
him.  
she comes back to bed  
and I stretch a leg out  
place it against hers.  
I was young once too.  
human relationships simply aren't  
durable.  
I think back to the women in  
my life.  
they seem non-existent.

"did he get his drill?" I ask.

"yes, he got his drill."

I wonder if I'll ever have to come  
back for my bermuda  
shorts and my record album  
by *The Academy of St. Martin in the  
Fields*? I suppose I  
will.

## *40,000 flies*

torn by a temporary wind  
we come back together again

check walls and ceilings for cracks and  
the eternal spiders

wonder if there will be one more  
woman

now  
40,000 flies running the arms of my  
soul  
singing  
*I met a million dollar baby in a  
5 and 10 cent  
store*

arms of my soul?  
flies?  
singing?

what kind of shit is  
this?

it's so easy to be a poet  
and so hard to be  
a man.

## *the strangest thing*

I was sitting in a chair  
in the dark  
when horrible sounds of torture  
and fear  
began in the brush  
outside of my window.  
it was obviously not a male cat  
and a female cat  
but a male and a male  
and from the sound  
one appeared to be much larger  
and was attacking with the intent to  
kill.  
then it stopped.

then it began again  
worse this time;  
the sounds were so terrible  
that I was unable to  
move.

then the sounds stopped.

I got up from my chair  
went to bed and  
slept.

I had a dream. this small grey and white  
cat came to me in my dream  
and it was very  
sad. it spoke to me,  
it said:  
"look what the other cat did to me."  
and it rested in my lap  
and I saw the slashes and

the raw flesh. then it  
jumped off my lap.

then that was all.

I awakened at 8:45 p.m.  
put on my clothes and walked outside  
and looked around.

there was nothing  
there.

I walked back inside and  
dropped two eggs  
into a pot of water  
and turned up the  
flame.

## *the paper on the floor*

...the drawing is poor and I know little of the plot:  
a man with a stable, world-earned face and the necktie of  
respectability, and a satisfied pipe; and his wife—  
signified by the quick ink of black hair (just ever so  
tousled with having *babies* and guiding them safely through  
the falls): there is a grandmother who sits somewhat like  
a flowerpot: allotted an earned space but not really  
*useful*; and a couple of smiling, knee-climbing gamins  
two little Jung and Adlers  
full of moot, black-type questions,  
and, of course,  
a young girl troubled with young loves  
(they take these things so much more *seriously* than the  
young men who  
go behind the barn);  
and there *is* a young man—her, I presume barn-wise, brother  
with this great tundra, this *shield* of black hair;  
he is horribly healthy  
and dressed in the latest in sport shirts  
in the best barn-wise manner;  
this big...brother (16? 17? 18? God wot?)  
is usually (when I read this, which is not very often)  
leaning forward over the car seat  
(he sits in the back, like the author)  
and makes some...comment on LIFE, capital all-the-way LIFE  
that is so VERY true  
that it just...upsets *everybody*  
except the poor kiddies who don't know what the hell it's  
all about in spite of their Jung and Adler  
and they just ride along round-eyed and sucking at their  
lollypops all up in the pretty pure white clouds;  
but, lo, the headman grinds his pipe grey-faced against this  
sporty truth that old men let lie like overgrown  
gas-meter covers; and the mother (wife wot?) draws down  
a long black eyebrow and one more strand of hair becomes  
unattached in the cool long struggle; and

Grandma, oh, I don't know—  
by then I have looked away; but I remember the girl,  
the young girl with young loves  
is always *especially* angry  
because the back of the barn has been blamed on her...  
locked with René the Frenchman, the struggling...painter or  
wot?  
nobody wants to face it but this...fat...sports-wear shirt  
character (who is *really* a nice strong boy who will really  
be O.K. some day) keeps bringing the cow out from behind the  
barn  
with the bull; but he is young  
and laughs  
and all somehow bear up;  
but best is his...*explanation* of it all,  
of the cow and the bull,  
with the inherent and instinctive...wiseness of his  
youth;  
the *explanation* usually comes in the morning  
over the breakfast table—  
before all this sickly struggling ordinary mess of common...  
humanity has had a chance  
to seat itself  
the healthy white...face laughs and tells it all;  
he's been sitting there waiting to tell it all,  
he's been sitting there with the little...twins (or wot?)  
as they spill porridge so cutely with their little spoons,  
this big...happy oaf who's never had a toothache  
has been sitting waiting the entrance of his elders  
(Granny who must put in her teeth, and Papa who is worried  
about the office, and Mama who isn't exactly straightened out  
yet; and the young girl who loves with faith, anger and...  
purity) in they come  
and he *throws* out an arm  
and tilting his healthy...carcass madly back in the chair  
before the sun-pure kitchen curtains  
and the little lovable, struggling bungling group  
he says his great say,  
and in the balloon above his head are the words

and by the twisted agony of the faces  
I am led to believe *something* has been said,  
but I read again  
looking carefully at the great happy spewing oaf's face  
the brown great deepness of the eyes  
and the young girl's teeth pushed out sour as if she had  
bitten into some lemon of truth,  
but there is something wrong  
there is some mistake  
because the sheet of paper I hold  
slants and angles in the electric light  
into the open dizziness of my dome  
and it huddles and curls itself into a puffy knot  
and pushes at the back of my eyes  
and pulls my nerves taut-thin from toe to hair-line  
and I know then that  
the great spewing oaf has said  
nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing  
nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing  
nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing  
and now,  
on the rug  
under the chair  
I can see the comic section  
folded in half,  
I can see the black and white lines  
and some faces I don't care to discern;  
but a thin illness overcomes me  
at the sight of this portion of paper  
and I look away  
and try not to think  
that much of our living life  
is true to the little paper faces  
that stare up from our feet  
and grin and jump and gesture,  
to be wrapped in tomorrow's garbage  
and thrown away.



## 2 *flies*

The flies are angry bits of  
life;  
why are they so angry?  
it seems they want more,  
it seems almost as if they  
are angry  
that they are flies;  
it is not my fault;  
I sit in the room  
with them  
and they taunt me  
with their agony;  
it is as if they were  
loose chunks of soul  
left out of somewhere;  
I try to read a paper  
but they will not let me  
be;  
one seems to go in half-circles  
high along the wall,  
throwing a miserable sound  
upon my head;  
the other one, the smaller one  
stays near and teases my hand,  
saying nothing,  
rising, dropping  
crawling near;  
what god puts these  
lost things upon me?  
other men suffer dictates of  
empire, tragic love...  
I suffer  
insects...  
I wave at the little one  
which only seems to revive  
his impulse to challenge:

he circles swifter,  
nearer, even making  
a fly-sound,  
and one above  
catching a sense of the new  
whirling, he too, in excitement,  
speeds his flight,  
drops down suddenly  
in a cuff of noise  
and they join  
in circling my hand,  
strumming the base  
of the lampshade  
until some man-thing  
in me  
will take no more  
*unholiness*  
and I strike  
with the rolled-up paper—  
missing!—  
striking,  
striking,  
they break in discord,  
some message lost between them,  
and I get the big one  
first, and he kicks on his back  
flicking his legs  
like an angry whore,  
and I come down again  
with my paper club  
and he is a smear  
of fly-ugliness;  
the little one circles high  
now, quiet and swift,  
almost invisible;  
he does not come near  
my hand again;  
he is tamed and  
inaccessible; I leave

him be, he leaves me  
be;  
the paper, of course,  
is ruined;  
something has happened,  
something has soiled my  
day,  
sometimes it does not  
take a man  
or a woman,  
only something alive;  
I sit and watch  
the small one;  
we are woven together  
in the air  
and the living;  
it is late  
for both of us.

## *through the streets of anywhere*

of course it is nonsense to try to patch up an  
old poem while drinking a warm beer  
on a Sunday afternoon; it is better to simply  
exist through the end of a cigarette;  
the people are listless and although this is a  
poor term of description  
Gershwin is on the radio  
banging and praying to get out;  
I have read the newspapers,  
carefully noting the suicides,  
I have also carefully noted  
the green of some tree  
like a nature poet on his last cup,  
and  
bang bang  
there they go outside;  
new children, some of them getting ready  
to sit here, and do as I am doing—  
warm beer, dead Gershwin,  
getting fat around the middle,  
disbelieving the starving years,  
Atlanta frozen like God's head  
holding an apple in the window,  
but we are all finally tricked and  
slapped to death  
like lovers' vows, bargained  
out of any gain,  
and the radio is finished  
and the phone rings and a female says,  
"I am free tonight;" well, she is not much  
but I am not much either;  
in adolescent fire I once thought I could ride  
a horse through the streets of anywhere,  
but they quickly shot this horse from under,  
"Ya got cigarettes?" she asks. "Yes," I say,  
"I got cigarettes." "Matches?" she asks.

"Enough matches to burn Rome." "Whiskey?"  
"Enough whiskey for a Mississippi River  
of pain." "You drunk?" "Not yet."  
She'll be over: perfect: a fig  
leaf and a small club, and  
I look at the poem I am trying to work with:

*I say that  
the backalleys will arrive upon  
the bloodyapes  
as noon arrives upon the Salinas  
fieldhands....*

bullshit. I rip the page once, twice,  
three times, then check for matches and  
icecubes, hot and cold,  
with some men their conversation is better than  
their creation  
and with other men  
it's a woman  
almost any woman  
that is their Rodin among park benches;  
bird down in road awaiting rats and wheels  
I know that I have deserted you,  
the icecubes pile like fool's gold  
in the pitcher  
and now they are playing  
Alex Scriabin  
which is a little better  
but not much  
for me.

## *fire station*

*(For Jane, with love)*

we came out of the bar  
because we were out of money  
but we had a couple of wine bottles  
in the room.

it was about 4 in the afternoon  
and we passed a fire station  
and she started to go  
crazy:

"a FIRE STATION! oh, I just love  
FIRE engines, they're so red and  
all! let's go in!"

I followed her on  
in. "FIRE ENGINES!" she screamed  
wobbling her big  
ass.

she was already trying to climb into  
one, pulling her skirt up to her  
waist, trying to jackknife up into the  
seat.

"here, here, lemme help ya!" a fireman ran  
up.

another fireman walked up to  
me: "our citizens are always welcome,"  
he told  
me.

the other guy was up in the seat with  
her. "you got one of those big THINGS?"

she asked him. "oh, hahaha!, I mean one of those big HELMETS!"

"I've got a big helmet too," he told her.

"oh, hahaha!"

"you play cards?" I asked *my* fireman. I had 43 cents and nothing but time.

"come on in back," he said. "of course, we don't gamble. it's against the rules."

"I understand," I told him.

I had run my 43 cents up to a dollar ninety when I saw her going upstairs with *her* fireman.

"he's gonna show me their sleeping quarters," she told me.

"I understand," I told her.

when her fireman slid down the pole ten minutes later I nodded him over.

"that'll be 5 dollars."

"5 dollars for  
that?"

"we wouldn't want a scandal, would  
we? we both might lose our  
jobs. of course, I'm not  
working."

he gave me the  
5.

"sit down, you might get it  
back."

"whatcha playing?"  
"blackjack."

"gambling's against the  
law."

"anything interesting is. besides,  
you see any money on the  
table?"  
he sat down.

that made 5 of  
us.

"how was it Harry?" somebody asked  
him.

"not bad, not  
bad."

the other guy went on  
upstairs.

they were bad players really.  
they didn't bother to memorize the



deck. they didn't know whether the  
high numbers or low numbers were left. and basically they hit  
too  
high,  
didn't hold low  
enough.

when the other guy came down  
he gave me a  
five.

"how was it, Marty?"  
"not bad. she's got...some fine  
movements."

"hit me!" I said. "nice clean girl. I  
ride it myself."

nobody said  
anything.

"any big fires lately?" I  
asked.

"naw. nothin'  
much."

"you guys need  
exercise. hit me  
again!"

a big red-headed kid who had been shining an  
engine  
threw down his rag and  
went upstairs.

when he came down he threw me a  
five.

when the 4th guy came down I gave him  
3 fives for a  
twenty.

I don't know how many firemen  
were in the building or where they  
were. I figured a few had slipped by me  
but I was a good  
sport.

it was getting dark outside  
when the alarm  
rang.

they started running around.  
guys came sliding down the  
pole.

then she came sliding down the  
pole. she was good with the  
pole. a real woman. nothing but guts  
and  
ass.

"let's go," I told  
her.

she stood there waving goodbye to the  
firemen but they didn't seem  
much interested  
any more.

"let's go back to the  
bar," I told  
her.

"ooh, you got  
money?"

"I found some I didn't know I had..."

we sat at the end of the bar  
with whiskey and beer  
chaser.

"I sure got a good  
sleep."

"sure, baby, you need your  
sleep."

"look at that sailor looking at me!  
he must think I'm a...a..."

"naw, he don't think that. relax, you've got  
class, real class. sometimes you remind me of an  
opera singer. you know, one of those prima d's.  
your class shows all over  
you. drink  
up."

I ordered 2  
more.

"you know, daddy, you're the only man I  
LOVE! I mean, really...LOVE! ya  
know?"

"sure I know. sometimes I think I am a king  
in spite of myself."

"yeah. yeah. *that's* what I mean, somethin' like  
that."

I had to go to the urinal. when I came back  
the sailor was sitting in my  
seat. she had her leg up against his and  
he was talking.

I walked over and got in a dart game with  
Harry the Horse and the corner  
newsboy.

## *an argument over Marshal Foch*

Foch was a great soldier, he said, Marshal Foch;  
listen, I said, if you don't keep it clean  
I'll have to slap you across the face with  
a wet towel.

I'll write the governor, he said.  
the governor is my uncle, I said.

Marshal Foch was my  
grandfather, he said.

I warned you, I said. I'm a  
gentleman.

And I'm a Foch, he said.  
that did it. I slapped him with a wet towel.

he grabbed the phone.  
governor's mansion, he said.

I slapped a wet rubber glove down  
his mouth and cut the wire.

outside the crickets were chirping like  
mad: Foch, Foch, Foch, Foch!  
they chirped.

I got out my sub-machine gun and blasted  
the devils  
but there were so many of them  
I had to give up.

I pulled the wet rubber glove out.  
I surrender, I said, it's too much:  
I can't change the world.

all the so-called ladies in the room  
applauded.

he stood up and bowed gallantly as  
outside the crickets chirped.

I put on my hat  
and stalked out. I still maintain  
the French are weak  
and no  
wonder.

## 40 cigarettes

I smoked 2 packs of cigarettes today and  
my tongue feels like a  
caterpillar trying to get out for  
rainwater  
somebody is working over  
Pictures at an Exhibition  
while tiny pimples of sweat  
work their way down my  
fat sides.  
too sick today and told the man  
over the phone  
it was stomach pains.  
the pains in the ass too and  
the soul?  
the gophers are underground  
staring at pictures on mudwalls  
machineguns are mounted in the  
windows.  
40 cigarettes.  
what's walking around  
chewing grass,  
4 legs, no  
hands?  
it's not the  
*politburo*.  
it could be a  
donkey. how'd you like to be in a  
donkey's head for a  
while? your body in a donkey's  
body? you'd only last  
ten minutes  
they'd have to let you  
out  
you'd be so  
scared  
but who's going to

let you out of that  
dismal bluepurple notion  
of what you are  
now? and I'm the one who's  
scared.



## *a killer gets ready*

he was a good one  
say 18, 19,  
a marine  
and everytime  
a woman came down the train aisle  
he seemed to stand up  
so I couldn't see  
her  
and the woman smiled at him

but I didn't smile  
at him

he kept looking at himself in the  
train window  
and standing up and taking off his  
coat and then standing up  
and putting it back  
on

he polished his belt buckle with a  
delighted vigor

and his neck was red and  
his face was red and his eyes were a  
pretty blue

but I didn't like  
him

and everytime I went to the can  
he was either in one of the cans  
or he was in front of one of the mirrors  
combing his hair or  
shaving

and he was always walking up and down the  
aisles  
or drinking water  
I watched his Adam's apple juggle the water  
down

he was always in my  
eyes

but we never spoke  
and I remembered all the other trains  
all the other buses  
all the other wars

he got off at Pasadena  
vainer than any woman  
he got off at Pasadena  
proud and  
dead

the rest of the trainride—  
8 or 10 miles—  
was perfect.

## *I love you*

I opened the door of this shanty and there she lay  
there she lay  
my love  
across the back of a man in a dirty undershirt.  
I was rough tough easy-with-money-Charley (that's me)  
and I awakened both of them  
like God  
and when she was awake  
she started screaming, "Hank, Hank!" (that's my other name)  
"take me away from this son of a bitch!  
I hate him I love you!"

of course, I was wise enough not to believe any of  
this and I sat down and said,  
"I need a drink, my head hurts and I need a  
drink."

this is the way love works, you see, and then we all sat there  
drinking the whiskey and I was  
perfectly satisfied  
and then he reached over and handed me a five,  
"that's all that's left of what she took, that's all that's left  
of what she took from you."

I was no golden-winged angel ripped up through  
boxtops  
I took the five and left them in there  
and I walked up the alley  
to Alvarado street  
and I turned in left  
at the first  
bar.

## *a little atomic bomb*

o, just give me a little atomic bomb  
not too much  
just a little  
enough to kill a horse in the street  
but there aren't any horses in the street

well, enough to knock the flowers from a bowl  
but I don't see any  
flowers in a  
bowl

enough then  
to frighten my love  
but I don't have any  
love

well  
give me an atomic bomb then  
to scrub in my bathtub  
like a dirty and lovable child

(I've got a bathtub)

just a little atomic bomb, general,  
with pugnose  
pink ears  
smelling like underclothes in  
July

do you think I'm crazy?  
I think you're crazy  
too  
so the way you think:  
send me one before somebody else  
does.

## *the egg*

he's 17.

mother, he said, how do I crack an egg?

all right, she said to me, you don't have to sit there looking like that.

oh, mother, he said, you broke the yoke. I can't eat a broken yoke.

all right, she said to me, you're so tough, you've been in the slaughterhouses, factories, the jails, you're so god damned tough, but all people don't have to be like you, that doesn't make everybody else wrong and you right.

mother, he said, can you bring me some cokes when you come home from work?

look, Raleigh, she said, can't you get the cokes on your bike, I'm tired after work.

but, mama, there's a hill.

what hill, Raleigh?

there's a hill,  
it's there and I have to peddle over it.

all right, she said to me, you think you're so god damned tough. you worked on a railroad track gang, I hear about it every time you get drunk:  
"I worked on a railroad track gang."

well, I said, I did.

I mean, what difference does it make?  
everybody has to work somewhere.

mama, said the kid, will you bring me those  
cokes?

I really like the kid. I think he's very  
gentle. and once he learns how to crack an  
egg he may do some  
unusual things. meanwhile  
I sleep with his mother  
and try to stay out of  
arguments.

## *the knifer*

you knifed me, he said, you told *Pink Eagle*  
not to publish me.  
oh hell, Manny, I said, get off it.

these poets are very sensitive  
they have more sensitivity than talent,  
I don't know what to do with them.

just tonight the phone rang and  
it was Bagatelli and Bagatelli said  
Clarsten phoned and Clarsten was pissed  
because we hadn't mailed him the  
anthology, and Clarsten blamed me  
for not mailing the anthology  
and furthermore Clarsten  
claimed I was trying to do him  
in, and he was very  
angry. so said  
Bagatelli.

you know, I'm really beginning to feel like  
a literary power  
I just lean back in my chair and roll cigarettes  
and stare at the walls  
and I am given credit for the life and death of  
poetic careers.  
at least I'm given credit for the  
death part.

actually these boys are dying off without my  
help. The sun has gone behind the cloud.  
I have nothing to do with the workings.  
I smoke Prince Albert, drink Schlitz  
and copulate whenever possible. believe in my  
innocence and I might consider  
yours.

## *the ladies of summer*

the ladies of summer will die like the rose  
and the lie

the ladies of summer will love  
so long as the price is not  
forever

the ladies of summer  
might love anybody;  
they might even love you  
as long as summer  
lasts

yet winter will come to them  
too

white snow and  
a cold freezing  
and faces so ugly  
that even death  
will turn away—  
wince—  
before taking  
them.



## *I'm in love*

she's young, she said,  
but look at me,  
I have pretty ankles,  
and look at my wrists, I have pretty  
wrists  
o my god,  
I thought it was all working,  
and now it's her again,  
every time she phones you go crazy,  
you told me it was over  
you told me it was finished,  
listen, I've lived long enough to become a  
good woman,  
why do you need a bad woman?  
you need to be tortured, don't you?  
you think life is rotten if somebody treats you  
rotten it all fits,  
doesn't it?  
tell me, is that it? do you want to be treated like a  
piece of shit?  
and my son, my son was going to meet you.  
I told my son  
and I dropped all my lovers.  
I stood up in a cafe and screamed  
I'M IN LOVE,  
and now you've made a fool of me...

I'm sorry, I said, I'm really sorry.

hold me, she said, will you please hold me?

I've never been in one of these things before, I said,  
these triangles...

she got up and lit a cigarette, she was trembling all  
over. she paced up and down, wild and crazy. she had

a small body. her arms were thin, very thin and when  
she screamed and started beating me I held her  
wrists and then I got it through the eyes: hatred,  
centuries deep and true. I was wrong and graceless and  
sick. all the things I had learned had been wasted.  
there was no living creature as foul as I  
and all my poems were  
false.

## *the apple*

this is not just an apple  
this is an experience  
red green yellow  
with underlying pits of white  
wet with cold water  
I bite into it  
christ, a white doorway...

another bite  
chewing  
while thinking of an old witch  
choking to death on an apple skin—  
a childhood story.

I bite deeply  
chew and swallow

there is a feeling of waterfalls  
and endlessness

there is a mixture of electricity and  
hope.

yet now  
halfway through the apple  
some depressive feelings begin

it's ending  
I'm working toward the core  
afraid of seeds and stems

there's a funeral march beginning in Venice,  
a dark old man has died after a lifetime of pain

I throw away the apple early  
as a girl in a white dress walks by my window

followed by a boy half her size  
in blue pants and striped  
shirt

I leave off a small belch  
and stare at a dirty  
ashtray.

## *the violin player*

he was in the upper grandstand  
at the end  
where they made their stretch moves  
after coming off the curve.

he was a small man  
pink, bald, fat  
in his 60's.

he was playing a violin  
he was playing classical music on  
his violin  
and the horseplayers ignored him.

Banker Agent won the first race  
and he played his violin.

Can Fly won the 3rd race and  
he continued to play his violin.

I went to get a coffee and when I came back  
he was still playing, and he was still playing  
after Boomerang won the 4th.

nobody stopped him  
nobody asked him what he was doing  
nobody applauded.

after Pawee won the 5th  
he continued  
the music falling over the edge of the  
grandstand and into the  
wind and sun.

Stars and Stripes won the 6th  
and he played some more

and Staunch Hope got up on the inside  
to take the 7th  
and the violin player worked away  
and when Lucky Mike won at 4 to 5 in the 8th  
he was still making music.

after Dumpty's Goddess took the last  
and they began their long slow walk to their cars  
beaten and broke again  
the violin player continued  
sending his music after them  
and I sat there listening  
we were both alone up there and  
when he finished I applauded.  
the violin player stood up  
faced me and bowed.  
then he put his fiddle in the case  
got up and walked down the stairway.

I allowed him a few minutes  
and then I got up  
and began the long slow walk to my car.  
it was getting into evening.

## *5 dollars*

I am dying of sadness and alcohol  
he said to me over the bottle  
on a soft Thursday afternoon  
in an old hotel room by the train depot.

I have, he went on, betrayed myself with  
belief, deluded myself with love  
tricked myself with sex.

the bottle is damned faithful, he said,  
the bottle will not lie.

meat is cut as roses are cut  
men die as dogs die  
love dies like dogs die,  
he said.

listen, Ronny, I said,  
lend me 5 dollars.

love needs too much help, he said.  
hate takes care of itself.

just 5 dollars, Ronny.

hate contains truth. beauty is a facade.

I'll pay you back in a week.

stick with the thorn  
stick with the bottle  
stick with the voices of old men in hotel rooms.

I ain't had a decent meal, Ronny, for a  
couple of days.

stick with the laughter and horror of death.  
keep the butterfat out.  
get lean, get ready.

something in my gut, Ronny, I'll be able  
to face it.

to die alone and ready and unsurprised,  
that's the trick.

Ronny, listen—

that majestic weeping you hear  
will not be for  
us.

I suppose not, Ronny.

the lies of centuries, the lies of love,  
the lies of Socrates and Blake and Christ  
will be your bedmates and tombstones  
in a death that will never end.

Ronny, my poems came back from the  
*New York Quarterly*.

that is why they weep,  
without knowing.

is that what all that noise is, I said,  
my god shit.



## *cooperation*

she means well.  
play the piano  
she says  
it's not good for you  
not to write.

she's going for a walk  
on the island  
or a boatride.  
I believe she's taken a modern novel  
and her reading glasses.

I sit at the window  
with her electric typewriter  
and watch young girls' asses  
which are attached to  
young girls.

the final decadence.

I have 20 published books  
and 6 cans of beer.

the tourists bob up and down in the water  
the tourists walk and talk and take  
photographs and  
drink soft drinks.

it's not good for me not to  
write.

she's in a boat now, a  
sightseeing tour  
and she's thinking, looking  
at the waves—  
"it's 2:30 p.m.  
he must be writing

it's not good for him not to write.  
tonight there will be other things to do.  
I hope he doesn't drink  
too much beer. he's a much better  
lover than Robert was  
and the sea is beautiful."

## *the night I was going to die*

the night I was going to die  
I was sweating on the bed  
and I could hear the crickets  
and there was a cat fight outside  
and I could feel my soul dropping down through the  
mattress  
and just before it hit the floor I jumped up  
I was almost too weak to walk  
but I walked around and turned on all the lights  
then made it back to the bed  
and again my soul dropped down through the mattress  
and I leaped up  
just before it hit the floor  
I walked around and I turned on all the lights  
and then I went back to bed  
and down it dropped again and  
I was up  
turning on all the lights

I had a 7 year old daughter  
and I felt sure she didn't want me dead  
otherwise it wouldn't have  
mattered

but all that night  
nobody phoned  
nobody came by with a beer  
my girlfriend didn't phone  
all I could hear were the crickets and it was  
hot  
and I kept working at it  
getting up and down  
until the first of the sun came through the window  
through the bushes  
and then I got on the bed  
and the soul stayed

inside at last and  
I slept.  
now people come by  
beating on the doors and windows  
the phone rings  
the phone rings again and again  
I get great letters in the mail  
hate letters and love letters.  
everything is the same again.

## 2347 Duane

there's this blue baby and she's sucking a  
blue breast under a green vine that has  
grown from the ceiling,  
and further to the right  
there's a light brown girl  
against a dark brown background  
and she's leaning out over a chair looking  
pensive, I suppose.  
my cigarette just went out  
there are never any matches around here  
and I get up and go into the kitchen  
and light it on a 30 year old stove.  
I get back without accident.  
now behind me on a pink chair  
is a large old-fashioned shears.  
it is 15 minutes past midnight  
and the hook is on the door  
and over the tall twisted lamp by the bed  
is a red floppy hat that is used as a lampshade  
and a small dog growls at the tall cold sky outside.  
there are two mattresses on the floor  
and I have slept on one of those mattresses  
many nights.  
they say they are going to bulldoze this place  
which is owned by a Japanese wrestler called Fuji.  
I don't see how it can be replaced with anything better.

she fixed the bathtub faucet and the faucet in the sink  
tonight. she can't roll a cigarette but she keeps the  
plumbing bills down.  
we ate some Col. Sanders chicken with coleslaw, mashed spuds,  
gravy and biscuits.  
it's 23 minutes past midnight  
and they are going to bulldoze this place,  
I don't mean tomorrow, I mean soon,  
and the small dog growls at the sky again

and my cigarette is out again;  
the love on that one mattress near the door,  
the sex and the arguments and the dreams and the  
conversations,  
that bulldozer is going to come up missing there,  
and even when it knocks down the trees and the crapper  
and eats holes in the dirt driveway  
it's not going to get it all,  
and when I drive by in 6 months and see the highrise  
filled with 50 people with good stable incomes,  
I will still remember the blue baby sucking the blue breast,  
the vine through the roof, the brown girl,  
the leaky faucets, the spiders and the termites,  
the grey and yellow paint, the tablecloth over the front  
window, and that mattress near the door.

## *a radio with guts*

it was on the 2nd floor on Coronado Street  
I used to get drunk  
and throw the radio through the window  
while it was playing, and, of course,  
it would break the glass in the window  
and the radio would sit out there on the roof  
still playing  
and I'd tell my woman,  
"Ah, what a marvelous radio!"

the next morning I'd take the window  
off the hinges  
and carry it down the street  
to the glass man  
who would put in another pane.

I kept throwing that radio through the window  
each time I got drunk  
and it would sit out there on the roof  
still playing—  
a magic radio  
a radio with guts,  
and each morning I'd take the window  
back to the glass man.

I don't remember how it ended exactly  
though I do remember  
we finally moved out.  
there was a woman downstairs who worked in  
the garden in her bathing suit  
and her husband complained he couldn't sleep nights  
because of me  
so we moved out  
and in the next place  
I either forgot to throw the radio out the window  
or I didn't feel like it  
anymore.

I do remember missing the woman who worked in the  
garden in her bathing suit,  
she really dug with that trowel  
and she put her behind up in the air  
and I used to sit in the window  
and watch the sun shine all over that thing  
while the music played.



## *Solid State Marty*

he's almost 80 and they went to  
visit him the other  
day. he was sitting in his chair  
with a burlap rug over his  
lap  
and when they walked in  
the first thing he said was  
"Don't touch my cock!"

he had a gallon jug of  
zinfandel in his  
refrigerator, had just gotten off  
of  
5 days of  
tequila.

a new \$600 piano was in the center of  
the room,  
he'd bought it for his  
son.

he's always phoning for *me* to come over  
but when I do  
he's very dull. he agrees with  
everything I say and  
then he goes to  
sleep.

Solid State Marty.  
when I'm not there  
he does everything:  
sets fire to the couch  
pisses on his belly  
sings the National Anthem.

he gets call girls over and  
squirts them with  
seltzer water, he  
rips the telephone wire out  
of the wall

but before he does  
he telephones  
Paris  
Madrid  
Tokyo

he beats dogs  
cats  
people  
with his  
silver crutch

he tells stories about  
how he was a  
matador  
a boxer  
a pimp  
a friend of Ernie's  
a friend of Picasso

but when I come over  
he goes to sleep  
upright in his chair  
grey hair rumbling down over  
the silent  
dumb hawk face

his son starts talking  
and then it's time  
for me  
to go.

## *interviews*

young men from the underground  
newspapers and the small circulation  
magazines come  
more and more often  
to interview me—  
their hair is long  
they are thin  
have tape recorders and  
arrive with  
much beer.  
most  
of them  
manage to stay some hours and  
get intoxicated.

if one of my girlfriends is around  
I get her to do the  
talking.  
go ahead, I say, tell them the  
truth about me.

then they tell what they think is  
the truth.

they paint me to resemble the  
idiot  
which is true.

then I'm questioned:

*why did you stop writing for ten  
years?*

I don't know.

*how come you didn't get into the  
army?*

crazy.

*can you speak German?*

no.

*who are your favorite modern  
writers?*

I don't know.

I seldom see the  
interviews. although once one of  
the young men wrote back that  
my girlfriend had  
kissed him  
when I was in the bathroom.

you got off easy, I wrote back  
and by the way  
forget that shit I told you about  
Dos Passos. or was it  
Mailer? it's hot tonight  
and half the neighborhood is  
drunk. the other half is  
dead.

if I have any advice about writing  
poetry, it's—  
don't. I'm going to send out for  
some fried chicken.

buk

*face of a political candidate on a street billboard*

there he is:  
not too many hangovers  
not too many fights with women  
not too many flat tires  
never a thought of suicide  
  
not more than three toothaches  
never missed a meal  
never in jail  
never in love  
  
7 pairs of shoes  
  
a son in college  
  
a car one year old  
  
insurance policies  
  
a very green lawn  
  
garbage cans with tight lids  
  
he'll be elected.

## *Yankee Doodle*

I was young  
no stomach  
arms of wire  
but strong

I arrived drunk at the factory  
every morning  
and out-worked the whole pack of them  
without strain

the old guy  
his name was Sully  
good old Irish Sully  
he fumbled with screws

and whistled the same song all day  
long:

*Yankee Doodle came to town  
Ridin' on a pony  
He stuck a feather in his hat  
And called it macaroni...*

they say he had been whistling that song  
for years

I began whistling right along  
with him

we whistled together for hours  
him counting screws  
me packing 8 foot long light fixtures into  
coffin boxes

as the days went on  
he began to pale and tremble  
he'd miss a note now and then

I whistled on

he began to miss days  
then he missed a week

next I knew  
the word got out  
Sully was in a hospital for an  
operation

2 weeks later he came in with a cane  
and his wife

he shook hands with everybody  
a 40 year man

when they had the retirement party for him  
I missed it  
because of a terrible  
hangover

after he was gone  
oddly  
I kept looking for him,  
and I realized that he had  
never hated me, that I  
had only hated  
him  
I began drinking more  
missing more days

then they let me go  
too

I've never minded getting  
fired but that was the one time  
I felt it.



*blue moon, oh bleweeww moooooon  
how I adore you!*

I care for you, darling, I love you,  
the only reason I fucked L. is because you fucked  
Z. and then I fucked R. and you fucked N.  
and because you fucked N. I had to fuck  
Y. But I think of you constantly, I feel you  
here in my belly like a baby, love I'd call it,  
no matter what happens I'd call it love, and so  
you fucked C. and then before I could move  
you fucked W., so then I had to fuck D. But  
I want you to know that I love you, I think of you  
constantly, I don't think I've ever loved anybody  
like I love you.

bow wow bow wow wow  
bow wow bow wow wow.

*nothing is as effective  
as defeat*

always carry a notebook with you  
wherever you go, he said,  
and don't drink too much, drinking dulls  
the sensibilities,  
attend readings, note breath pauses,  
and when *you* read  
always understate  
underplay, the crowd is smarter than you  
might think,  
and when you write something  
don't send it out right away,  
put it in a drawer for two weeks,  
then take it out and look  
at it, and revise, revise,  
REVISE again and again,  
tighten lines like bolts holding the span  
of a 5 mile bridge,  
and keep a notebook by your bed,  
you will get thoughts during the night  
and these thoughts will vanish and be wasted  
unless you notate them.  
and don't drink, any fool can  
drink, we are men of  
letters.

for a guy who couldn't write at all  
he was about like the rest  
of them: he could sure  
talk about  
it.

## *success*

I had a most difficult job  
starting my 14 year old car today  
in 100 degree heat  
I had to take the carburetor off  
leap back and forth  
adjusting the set-screw,  
a 2 by 4 jammed against the gas pedal  
to hold it down.

I got it going—after 45 minutes—  
I mailed 4 letters  
purchased something cool  
came back  
got into my place  
and listened to Ives  
had dreams of empire  
my great white belly against  
the fan.

## *Africa, Paris, Greece*

there are these 2 women  
I know who are  
quite similar

almost the same  
age  
well-read  
literary

I once slept with both of  
them  
but that's all  
over

we're friends

they've been to Africa  
Paris  
Greece

here and there

fucked some famous men

one is now living with a  
millionaire  
some few miles  
from here  
goes to breakfast and  
dinner with him  
feeds his fish his cats and  
his dog  
when she gets drunk she phones  
me

the other is having it  
more difficult living  
alone in a small apartment in  
Venice (Calif.)  
listening to the bongo  
drums

famous men seem to want  
young women

a young woman is easier  
to get rid  
of: they have more  
places to  
go

it is difficult for women who  
were once beautiful  
to get  
old

they have to become more  
intelligent (if they want to  
hold their men) and do  
more things  
in bed and out of  
bed

these 2 women I know  
they're good both  
in and out of  
bed

and they're intelligent  
intelligent enough to know  
they can't come see me  
and stay  
more than an  
hour or two

they are quite  
similar

and I know  
if they read this poem  
they'll understand  
it  
just as well as they  
understand  
Rimbaud or Rilke

or Keats

meanwhile I have met a  
young blonde from the  
Fairfax district

as she looks at my paintings  
on the walls  
I rub the bottoms of  
her feet.

## *the drunk tank judge*

the drunk tank judge is  
late like any other  
judge and he is  
young  
well-fed  
educated  
spoiled and  
from a good  
family.

we drunks put out our cigarettes and await his  
mercy.

those who couldn't make bail are  
first. "guilty," they say, they all say,  
"guilty."  
"7 days." "14 days." "14 days and then you will be  
released to the Honor Farm." "4 days." "7 days."  
"14 days."

"judge, these guys beat hell out of a man  
in there."

"next."

"judge, they really beat hell out of me."

"next case, please."

"7 days." "14 days and then you will be released to the  
Honor Farm."

the drunk tank judge is  
young and  
overfed. he has  
eaten too many meals. he is  
fat.

the bail-out drunks are  
next. they put us in long lines and  
he takes us  
quickly. "2 days or 40 dollars." "2 days or 40  
dollars." "2 days or 40 dollars." "2 days or  
40 dollars."

there are 35 or  
40 of us.  
the courthouse is on San Fernando Road among the  
junkyards.

when we go to the bailiff he  
tells us,  
"your bail will apply."

"what?"

"your bail will apply."

the bail is \$50. the court keeps the  
ten.

we walk outside and get into our  
old automobiles.  
most of our automobiles look worse than  
the ones in the  
junkyards. some of us  
don't have any  
automobiles. most of us are  
Mexicans and poor whites.  
the trainyards are across the  
street. the sun is up  
good.

the judge has very  
smooth  
delicate  
skin. the judge has



fat  
jowls.

we walk and we drive away from the  
courthouse.

justice.

## *claws of paradise*

wooden butterfly  
baking soda smile  
sawdust fly—  
I love my belly  
and the liquor store man  
calls me,  
“Mr. Schlitz.”  
the cashiers at the race track  
scream,  
“THE POET KNOWS!”  
when I cash my tickets.  
the ladies  
in and out of bed  
say they love me  
as I walk by with wet  
white feet.

albatross with drunken eyes  
Popeye’s dirt-stained shorts  
bedbugs of Paris,  
I have cleared the barricades  
have mastered the  
automobile  
the hangover  
the tears  
but I know  
the final doom  
like any schoolboy viewing  
the cat being crushed  
by passing traffic.

my skull has an inch and a  
half crack right at the  
dome.  
most of my teeth are  
in front. I get

dizzy spells in supermarkets  
spit blood when I drink  
whiskey  
and become saddened to  
the point of  
grief  
when I think of all the  
good women I have known  
who have  
dissolved  
vanished  
over trivialities:  
trips to Pasadena,  
children's picnics,  
toothpaste caps down  
the drain.

there is nothing to do  
but drink  
play the horse  
bet on the poem

as the young girls  
become women  
and the machineguns  
point toward me  
crouched  
behind walls thinner  
than eyelids.

there's no defense  
except all the errors  
made.

meanwhile  
I take showers  
answer the phone  
boil eggs

study motion and waste  
and feel as good  
as the next while  
walking in the sun.

## *the loner*

16 and one-half inch  
neck  
68 years old  
lifts weights  
body like a young  
boy (almost)

kept his head  
shaved  
and drank port wine  
from half-gallon jugs

kept the chain on the  
door  
windows boarded

you had to give  
a special knock  
to get in

he had brass knucks  
knives  
clubs  
guns

he had a chest like a  
wrestler  
never lost his  
glasses

never swore  
never looked for  
trouble

never married after the death  
of his only  
wife

hated  
cats  
roaches  
mice  
humans

worked crossword  
puzzles  
kept up with the  
news

that 16 and one-half inch  
neck

for 68 he was  
something

all those boards  
across the windows

washed his own underwear  
and socks

my friend Red took me up  
to meet him  
one night

we talked a while  
together

then we left

Red asked, "what do you  
think?"

I answered, "more afraid to die  
than the rest of us."

I haven't seen either of them  
since.

## *the sandwich*

I walked down the street for a submarine sandwich  
and this guy pulled out of the driveway  
of The Institute of Sexual Education  
and almost ran over my toes  
with his bike;  
he had a black dirty beard  
eyes like a Russian pianist  
and the breath of an East Kansas City whore;  
it irritated me to be almost murdered by a  
fool in a sequin jacket;  
I looked upstairs and the girls sat in their chairs  
outside their doors  
dreaming old Greta Garbo movies;  
I put a half a buck into one of the paper racks  
and got the latest sex paper;  
then I went into the sandwich shop  
and ordered the submarine  
and a large coffee.  
they were all sitting in there talking about  
how to lose weight.  
I asked for a sideorder of  
french fries.  
the girls in the sex paper ads  
looked like girls in sex paper ads.  
they told me not to be lonely  
that they could fix me up:  
I could beat them with chains or whips  
or they could beat me  
with chains or whips, whichever way  
I wanted it.  
I finished, paid up, left a tip,  
left the sex paper on the seat.  
then I walked back up Western Avenue  
with my belly hanging out over  
my belt.

## *the happy life of the tired*

neatly in tune with  
the song of a fish  
I stand in the kitchen  
halfway to madness  
dreaming of Hemingway's  
Spain.  
it's muggy, like they say,  
I can't breathe,  
have crapped and  
read the sports pages,  
opened the refrigerator  
looked at a piece of purple  
meat,  
tossed it back  
in.

the place to find the center  
is at the edge  
that pounding in the sky  
is just a water pipe  
vibrating.

terrible things inch in the  
walls; cancer flowers grow  
on the porch; my white cat has  
one eye torn  
away and there are only 7 days  
of racing left in the  
summer meet.

the dancer never arrived from the  
Club Normandy  
and Jimmy didn't bring the  
hooker,  
but there's a postcard from  
Arkansas



and a throwaway from Food King:  
10 free vacations to Hawaii,  
all I got to do is  
fill out the form.  
but I don't want to go to  
Hawaii.

I want the hooker with the pelican eyes  
brass belly-button  
and  
ivory heart.

I take out the piece of purple  
meat  
drop it into the  
pan.

then the phone rings.

I fall to one knee and roll under the  
table. I remain there  
until it  
stops.

then I get up and  
turn on the  
radio.  
no wonder Hemingway was a  
drunk, Spain be damned,  
I can't stand it  
either.

it's so  
muggy.

*the proud  
thin  
dying*

I see old people on pensions in the  
supermarkets and they are thin and they are  
proud and they are dying  
they are starving on their feet and saying  
nothing. long ago, among other lies,  
they were taught that silence was  
bravery. now, having worked a lifetime,  
inflation has trapped them. they look around  
steal a grape  
chew on it. finally they make a tiny  
purchase, a day's worth.  
another lie they were taught:  
thou shalt not steal.  
they'd rather starve than steal  
(one grape won't save them)  
and in tiny rooms  
while reading the market ads  
they'll starve  
they'll die without a sound  
pulled out of roominghouses  
by young blond boys with long hair  
who'll slide them in  
and pull away from the curb, these  
boys  
handsome of eye  
thinking of Vegas and pussy and  
victory.  
it's the order of things: each one  
gets a taste of honey  
then the knife.

## *under*

I can't pick anything up  
off the floor—  
old socks  
shorts  
shirts  
newspapers  
letters  
spoons bottles beercaps

can't make the bed  
hang up the toilet paper  
brush my teeth  
comb my hair  
dress

I stay on the bed  
naked  
on the soiled sheets  
which are half on the  
floor  
the buttons on the mattress  
press into my  
back

when the phone rings  
when somebody comes to the door  
I anger

I'm like a bug under a rock  
with that fear too

I stay in bed  
notice the mirror on the dresser

it is a victory to scratch  
myself.

## *hot month*

got 3 women coming down in  
July, maybe more  
they want to suck my blood-  
vibes

do I have enough  
clean towels?

I told them that I was feeling  
bad  
(I didn't expect all these  
mothers  
arriving with their tits  
distended)

you see  
I am too good  
with the drunken letter  
and the drunken phonecall  
screaming for love  
when I probably don't  
have it

I am going out to buy more  
towels  
bedsheets  
Alka-Seltzer  
washrags  
mop handles  
mops  
swords  
knives  
bombs  
vaseline flowers of yearning  
the works of  
De Sade.

*maybe tomorrow*

looked like  
                  Bogart  
sunken cheeks  
chain smoker  
pissed out of windows  
ignored women  
snarled at landlords  
rode boxcars through the badlands  
never missed a chance to duke it  
full of roominghouse and skidrow stories  
ribs showing  
flat belly  
walking in shoes with nails driving into his heels  
looking out of windows  
cigar in mouth  
lips wet with beer  
                  Bogart's  
got a beard now  
he's much older  
but don't believe the gossip:  
                  Bogie's not dead  
yet.

## *junk*

sitting in a dark bedroom with 3 junkies,  
female.  
brown paper bags filled with trash are  
everywhere.  
it is one-thirty in the afternoon.  
they talk about madhouses,  
hospitals.  
they are waiting for a fix.  
none of them work.  
it's relief and foodstamps and  
Medi-Cal.

men are usable objects  
toward the fix.

it is one-thirty in the afternoon  
and outside small plants grow.  
their children are still in school.  
the females smoke cigarettes  
and suck listlessly on beer and  
tequila  
which I have purchased.

I sit with them.  
I wait on my fix:  
I am a poetry junkie.

they pulled Ezra through the streets  
in a wooden cage.  
Blake was sure of God.  
Villon was a mugger.  
Lorca sucked cock.  
T. S. Eliot worked a teller's cage.

most poets are swans,  
egrets.

I sit with 3 junkies  
at one-thirty in the afternoon.

the smoke pisses upward.

I wait.

death is a nothing jumbo.

one of the females says that she likes  
my yellow shirt.

I believe in a simple violence.

this is  
some of it.

## 8 rooms

my dentist is a drunk.  
he rushes into the room while I'm  
having my teeth cleaned:  
"hey, you old fuck! you still  
writing dirty stories?"  
"yes."  
he looks at the nurse:  
"me and this old fuck, we both used  
to work for the post office down at  
the terminal annex!"  
the nurse doesn't answer.  
"look at us now! we got *out* of  
there; we got out of that place,  
didn't we?"  
"yes, yes..."  
he runs off into another room.  
he hires beautiful young girls,  
they are everywhere.  
they work a 4 day week and he drives  
a yellow Caddy.  
he has 8 rooms besides the waiting  
room, all equipped.  
the nurse presses her body against  
mine. it's unbelievable  
her breasts, her thighs, her body  
press against me. she picks at my teeth  
and looks into my eyes:  
"am I hurting you?"  
"no no, go ahead!"

in 15 minutes the dentist is back:  
"hey, don't take too long!  
what's going on, anyhow?"  
"Dr., this man hasn't had his teeth  
cleaned for 5 years. they're filthy!"  
"all right, finish him off! give him



another appointment!"  
he runs out.  
"would you like another appointment?"  
she looks into my eyes.  
"yes," I tell her.  
she lets her body fall full against mine  
and gives me a few last scrapes.  
the whole thing only costs me forty dollars  
including x-rays.  
  
but she never told me her  
name.

## *I liked him*

I liked D. H. Lawrence  
he could get so indignant  
he snapped and he ripped  
with wonderfully energetic sentences  
he could lay the word down  
bright and writhing  
there was the stink of blood and murder  
and sacrifice about him  
the only tenderness he allowed  
was when he bedded down his large German  
wife.

I liked D. H. Lawrence—  
he could talk about Christ  
like he was the man next door  
and he could describe Australian taxi drivers  
so well you hated them  
I liked D. H. Lawrence  
but I'm glad I never met him  
in some bistro  
him lifting his tiny hot cup of  
tea  
and looking at me  
with his worm-hole eyes.

## *the killer smiles*

the old girl friends still phone  
some from last year  
some from the year before  
some from the years before that.  
it's good to have things done with  
when they don't work  
it's also good not to hate  
or even forget  
the person you've failed  
with.

and I like it when they tell me  
they are having luck with a man  
luck with their life.

after surviving me  
they have many joys due them.  
I make their lives seem better  
after me.

now I have given them  
comparisons  
new horizons  
new cocks  
more peace  
a good future  
without me.

I always hang up,  
justified.

## *horse and fist*

boxing matches and the racetracks  
are where the guts are extracted and  
rubbed into the cement  
into the substance and stink of  
being.

there is no peace either for the  
flower or the tiger.  
that's obvious.

what is not obvious are the rules.  
there are no rules.

some attempt to find rules in the teachings of  
others  
and adjust to that  
sight.

for me  
obedience to another is the decay  
of self.

for though every being is similar  
each being is different

and to herd our differences  
under one law  
degrades each  
self.

the boxing matches and the racetracks are  
temples of learning

as the same horse and the same man  
do not always win or lose  
for the same reason

so does learning  
sometimes  
stand still  
pause or  
reverse itself.

there are very very  
few  
guidelines.

no rules  
but a hint:

watch for the lead right  
and the last flash of the  
tote.

## *close encounters of another kind*

are we going to the movies or not?  
she asked him.

all right, he said, let's go.

I'm not going to put any panties on  
so you can finger-fuck me in the  
dark, she said.

should we get buttered popcorn?  
he asked.

sure, she said.

leave your panties on,  
he said.

what is it? she asked.

I just want to watch the movie,  
he answered.

look, she said, I could go out on  
the street, there are a hundred men  
out there who'd be delighted to have  
me.

all right, he said, go ahead out there.  
I'll stay home and read the *National  
Enquirer*.

you son of a bitch, she said, I am  
*trying* to build a meaningful  
relationship.

you can't build it with a hammer,  
he said.

are we going to the movies or not?  
she asked.

all right, he said, let's  
go...

at the corner of Western and  
Franklin he put on the blinker  
to make his left turn  
and a man in the on-coming lane  
speeded-up  
as if to cut him off.

brakes grabbed. there wasn't a  
crash but there almost was one.

he cursed at the man in the other  
car. the man cursed back. the  
man had another person in the car with  
him. it was *his* wife.

they were going to the movies  
too.

## *mermaid*

I had to come to the bathroom for something  
and I knocked  
and you were in the tub  
you had washed your face and your hair  
and I saw your upper body  
and except for the breasts  
you looked like a girl of 5, of 8  
you were gently gleeful in the water  
Linda Lee.  
you were not only the essence of that  
moment  
but of all my moments  
up to then  
you bathing easily in the ivory  
yet there was nothing  
I could tell you.

I got what I wanted in the bathroom  
something  
and I left.



## *hug the dark*

turmoil is the god  
madness is the god

permanent living peace is  
permanent living death.

agony can kill  
or  
agony can sustain life  
but peace is always horrifying  
peace is the worst thing  
walking  
talking  
smiling,  
seeming to be.

don't forget the sidewalks  
the whores,  
betrayal,  
the worm in the apple,  
the bars, the jails,  
the suicides of lovers.

here in America  
we have assassinated a president and his brother,  
another president has quit office.

people who believe in politics  
are like people who believe in god:  
they are sucking wind through bent  
straws.

there is no god  
there are no politics  
there is no peace  
there is no love

there is no control  
there is no plan  
stay away from god  
remain disturbed  
slide.

## *59 cents a pound*

I like to prowl ordinary places  
and taste the people—  
from a distance.

I don't want them too near  
because that's when attrition  
starts.

but in supermarkets  
laundromats  
cafés

street corners  
bus stops

eating places  
drug stores

I can look at their bodies  
and their faces

and their clothing—  
watch the way they walk  
or stand

or what they are doing.  
I'm like an x-ray machine

I like them like that:  
on view.

I imagine the best things  
about them.

I imagine them brave and crazy  
I imagine them beautiful.

I like to prowl the ordinary places.  
I feel sorry for us all or glad for us

all  
caught alive together  
and awkward in that way.

there's nothing better than the joke  
of us

the seriousness of us  
the dullness of us

buying stockings and carrots and gum  
and magazines  
buying birth control  
candy  
hair spray  
and toilet paper.

we should build a great bonfire  
we should congratulate ourselves on our  
endurance

we stand in long lines  
we walk about  
we wait.

I like to prowl ordinary places  
the people explain themselves to me  
and I to them

a woman at 3:35 p.m.  
weighing purple grapes on a scale  
looking at that scale very  
seriously  
she is dressed in a simple green dress  
with a pattern of white flowers  
she takes the grapes  
puts them carefully into a white paper  
bag

that's lightning enough

the generals and the doctors may kill us  
but we have  
won.

## *promenade*

each night  
well, almost every night  
early in the evening  
I see the old man  
and his small black and white dog.  
it's dark on these streets  
and no matter how often he has seen me  
he always gives me  
a look that is frightened  
and yet bold—  
bold because his small brittle dog is  
with him.  
he wears old clothing  
a wrinkled cap  
cotton gloves  
large square-toed shoes.  
we never speak.  
he is my age but I feel younger.  
I neither like nor dislike the man and his  
dog.  
I have never seen either of them  
defecate but I know that they  
must.  
he and his dog give me a feeling of  
peace.  
they belong  
like the street signs  
the lawns  
the yellow windows  
the sidewalks  
the sirens and the telephone  
wires.  
the driveways  
the parked cars  
the moon when there is a  
moon.

## *metamorphosis*

a girlfriend came in  
built me a bed  
scrubbed and waxed the kitchen floor  
scrubbed the walls  
vacuumed  
cleaned the toilet  
the bathtub  
scrubbed the bathroom floor  
and cut my toenails and  
my hair.

then  
all on the same day  
the plumber came and fixed the kitchen faucet  
and the toilet  
and the gas man fixed the heater  
and the phone man fixed the phone.  
now I sit here in all this perfection.  
it is quiet.  
I have broken off with all 3 of my girlfriends.

I felt better when everything was in  
disorder.  
it will take me some months to get back to  
normal:  
I can't even find a roach to commune with.

I have lost my rhythm.  
I can't sleep.  
I can't eat.

I have been robbed of  
my filth.

## *we'll take them*

those lobsters  
those 2 lobsters...  
yes, those bastards there.  
we'll take them...

so pink-red.

they say if you put them  
in warm water first  
they'll sleep  
and when you boil them  
they won't feel it.

how can we know?

no matter the burning tanks outside  
Stalingrad  
no matter that Hitler was a  
vegetarian  
no matter that the house I was born in  
is now a brothel  
in Andernach  
no matter that my Uncle Heinrich  
aged 92 and living in that same town  
dislikes my novels and short stories.

we'll take those 2  
bastards there

*flowers of the sea.*

## *dow average down*

when you  
first meet them their eyes  
are all under-  
standing; laughter abounds  
like sand fleas. then, Jesus,  
time tinkles on and  
things leak. they  
start making DÉMANDS.  
what they  
demand is contrary to what-  
ever you are, or could be.  
strange is the  
thought that they've never  
read anything you've writ-  
ten, not really read it at  
all. or worse, if they have,  
they've come to SAVE  
you. which mainly means  
making you like everybody  
else. meanwhile they've sucked  
you up and wound you tight  
in a million webs, and  
being something of a  
feeling person you can't  
help but remember the  
good parts or the parts  
that *seemed* to be good.

you find yourself  
alone again in your  
bedroom grabbing your  
guts and saying, o, shit  
no, not again.

we should have known.  
maybe we wanted cotton



candy luck. maybe we  
believed. what trash.  
we believed like dogs  
believe.

## *to weep*

sweating in the kitchen  
trying to hit one out of here  
56 years old  
fear bounding up my arms  
toenails much too long  
growth on side of leg

the difference in the factories was  
we all felt pain  
together

the other night I went to see the  
great soprano  
she was still beautiful  
still sensual  
still in personal mourning  
but she missed note after note  
drunk  
she murdered art

sweating in the kitchen  
I don't want to murder art

I should see the doctor and get that thing  
cut off my leg  
but I am a coward  
I might scream and frighten a child  
in the waiting room

I would like to fuck the great soprano  
I'd like to weep in her hair

and there's Lorca down in the road  
eating Spanish bullets in the dust

the great soprano has never read my poems  
but we both know how to murder art  
drink and mourn

sweating in this kitchen  
the formulas are gone  
the best poet I ever knew is dead  
the others write me letters

I tell them that I want to fuck  
the great soprano  
but they write back about other  
things  
useless things  
dull things  
vain things

I watch a fly land on my radio

he knows what it is  
but he can't talk to me

the soprano is dead.

*fair stand the fields of France*

in the awesome strumming of no  
guitars  
I can never get too high

in places where giraffes run like  
hate  
I can never get too lonely

in bars where celluloid bartenders  
serve poisoned laughter  
I can never get too drunk

at the bottom of mountains  
where suicides flow into the streams  
I smile better than the Mona Lisa

high lonely drunken grin of grief  
I love you.

*art*

as the  
spirit  
waned  
the  
form  
appears.

## About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli* (2001), and *Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in more than a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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